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The Society of the Cincinnati in the State of Georgia

By ALBERT SIDNEY BRITT, JR.*

FORMED by the commissioned officers of the Continental Army at the cantonments on the Hudson River near Newburgh, New York, on the 13th of May, 1783, the Society of the Cincinnati is a military, benevolent, patriotic and non-political organization. The Army was about to be disbanded after eight long years of warfare and it seemed fitting to the officers to resolve with each other to keep alive the ideals for which they had fought. Generals Heath, Steuben and Knox were the leaders and they presented to General Washington a copy of the Institution of the Order, requesting that he honor the Society by inscribing his name first upon the roll and accepting the office of President General. He consented to both requests.

At the organizational meeting the Institution was adopted as follows: "The Officers of the American Army having generally been taken from the citizens of America, possess high veneration for the character of that illustrious Roman, LUCIUS QUINTUS CINCINNATUS; and being resolved to follow his example by returning to their citizenship, they think they may with propriety denominate themselves:

"THE SOCIETY OF THE CINCINNATI"

A strong sense of brotherly affection and responsibility is evident in the Principles adopted by these veterans of the first war of the United States; these Principles remain immutable and guide the Society to this day:

An incessant attention to preserve inviolate those exalted rights and liberties of human nature, for which they fought and bled, and without which the high rank of a rational being is a curse instead of a blessing. An unalterable determination to promote and cherish, be-

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tween the respective States, that union and national honor so essentially necessary to their future happiness and the future dignity of the American Empire. To render permanent the cordial affection subsisting among the officers. This spirit will dictate brotherly kindness in all things, and particularly extend to the most substantial acts of beneficence to the ability of the Society, towards those officers and their families who unfortunately may be under the necessity of receiving it.

The final sentence of the Principles sets the tone and spirit of the Society. Many officers had been killed or permanently disabled during the war and there were many dependents and disabled survivors who were in need. To provide the means for this worthy aim, each member contributed one month's pay. These funds were administered by the respective state societies according to their desires.

Shortly after the Society was organized Major Pierre L'Enfant, an Engineer officer on General Washington's staff and who later planned the City of Washington, designed the Order of the Society, the Eagle, which was adopted at the next meeting. He also designed the Diploma, or certificate of membership, and was charged by General Washington with having a copper engraving plate executed in France from his design. This plate is still in existence and is kept for the Society by the Library of Congress. It was last used in the 1880's, but is usable today.¹

The Society of the Cincinnati was originated at a time when it appeared that the Articles of Confederation would be an insufficient instrument around which the newly-formed government of the United States could operate. Upon the same concept, it was natural that the Society should have been organized as a federation of thirteen state societies and one in France. Each of these is relatively autonomous and operates within the Institution and the Principles of the Society as a whole. Members are elected in the state in which his *propositus* served, not to the Society as a whole. Succession is hereditary and there is but one representative for each eligible officer in the Revolution. At the time the Society was formed there were about 3,500 officers eligible to join; 2,402 did so. Today the membership is about 2,400.

No sooner had the Society been formed than bitter opposition arose. The first blow was struck by an eccentric Irish judge in South Carolina, Aedanus Burke, who had studied theology at St. Omer, France, and later became a member of the Supreme Court of South Carolina. Burke wrote a bitter pamphlet, under the pseudonym "Cassius," against the Society charging it was merely a cloak to hide the intentions of the officers to set themselves up as a nobility in America. Burke's pamphlet was in tune with anti-aristocratic feelings of the time in America—though he was charged with being so acrimonious because he was not eligible to join the Society—and a hue and cry arose across the land and across the seas. The volatile Count de Mirabeau wrote passionately against the Cincinnati and translated Burke's pamphlet into French and added his own comments. This was then translated back into English and widely distributed in America and England; there were even editions in German. Meanwhile other political leaders in the former Colonies criticized the Society; Jefferson was adamantly against the hereditary feature in the Institution and it was believed his opposition influenced General Washington to recommend the elimination of this rule at the General Meeting of the Society in Philadelphia in May, 1784—Washington apparently feared that controversy over the Society might cause a division in the country which would jeopardize the formation of a workable central government. However, all of the State Societies did not ratify the change in the Institution and it thus did not become effective throughout. Virginia was one of the few to adopt the change for their own use and that Society consequently died out with the death of the last member about 1840—the Virginia Society's endowment fund was given to Washington College (now Washington and Lee University) and became the nucleus of the present endowment of that University. Whether due to opposition or to lack of interest, seven of the thirteen American Societies became inactive in the first half of the 19th Century. The French Society was "rendered dormant and members dispersed by the Reign of Terror, August 10, 1792."²

The Georgia Society adopted the change in the Institution to eliminate the hereditary feature but later withdrew their ratification because no other satisfactory solution could be found to ensure the continuation of the Society. At a Special Meeting on April 15, 1790 the members "resolved to repeal their former vote of adoption, whereby the sense of this Society was plainly and fully expressed to be in favor of the Original Constitution."³

Though many of the State Societies became dormant, the spirit still flourished among its members and those eligible for membership. An example is General Aruthur St. Clair, first Governor of the Northwest Territory, who founded and named the City of Cincinnati in Ohio for the Society, of which he was a member.

During the 187 years of the Society few members of the Georgia Society have held officer positions in the General Society. One of these is the present President General, the Honorable Frank Anderson Chisholm of Savannah. Alexander Hamilton succeeded General Washington as President General upon the latter's death and Hamilton was followed by two South Carolinians. Charles Cotesworth Pinckney and Thomas Pinckney; there were no other Southerners in that position until 1932.

When the nation celebrated its centennial, interest in the Society was revived. This was partly brought about because of the prominent part played by the Cincinnati in the celebrations and the recognition of the Society by the United States Congress. During the twenty years from 1882 to 1902, all of the dormant American Societies gained readmittance; the French Society was revived in 1925.

In 1939, not long after the death of Mr. Larz Anderson, Mrs. Anderson gave their stately residence, located at 2118 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W., Washington, D. C., to the Society for its permanent headquarters and museum. This filled a longstanding need. Mr. Anderson spent most of his adult life in the diplomatic service and furnished his home with objects of art from his many travels; many of these remain in the house today. In addition to the headquarters and museum, each state is allocated rooms which are furnished according to their desires. The

Georgia suite is furnished with paintings of distinguished members of the Society, scenes from historic Savannah, memorabilia, and handsome antiques which have been contributed by the members.⁴

The Society of the Cincinnati in the State of Georgia held its first meeting in Savannah on Wednesday, August 13, 1783, at the quarters of Captain John Lucas. General Lachlan McIntosh read the Institution of the Society, a copy of which had been forwarded to him by General Heath following the earlier meetings at the cantonments of the Army on the Hudson. At the meeting of the Georgia officers, the Institution was adopted and a slate of officers elected; they were: President, General Lachlan McIntosh; Vice President, Colonel Samuel Elbert; Secretary, Captain John Milton; Treasurer, Lt. Col. John McIntosh; and Assistant Treasurer, Major John Habersham. On September 1, 1783, another meeting was held at which each member signed the Institution and "a bill for one month's pay respectively, on the Pay-Master General of the Army, agreeable thereto, which was done accordingly."⁵

The original records of the Georgia Society have been presumed lost for more than a century and there is little likelihood they will ever be found. However, Mr. Francis Apthorp Foster, one of the moving spirits in reviving the Society in 1902, was able to reconstruct a good portion of its early actions through issues of the *Georgia Gazette*, records of the Secretary-General, historical works and personal journals and diaries. Reports of the early meetings indicate a prevailing social atmosphere and little business was apparently found necessary. There was some difference of opinion as to whether the funds of the Society should be placed in custody of the Georgia Legislature, as recommended by General Washington and some members serving as General Officers of the Society. In the absence of a decision on this matter, the funds remained in the custody of the Treasurer of the United States for many years. Aside from a few such weighty matters, most meetings seem to have been similar to the one of July 4, 1791; the minutes record: "after the business of the day [the election of officers] was concluded, The Society dined together,

and spent the evening in mirth and harmony, and the following toasts were drank: [there were fifteen toasts!]"

The last meeting of the original Georgia Society for which any record has survived was held March 2, 1822. Newspaper accounts state that officers were elected but no further information about the meetings was given. The officers were: General John McIntosh, President; The Honorable John Macpherson Berrien, Vice President; John F. Ford, Treasurer; and Joseph C. Habersham, Secretary. General McIntosh died in 1826, so presumably Mr. Berrien, who led a distinguished life in government as Andrew Jackson's Attorney General and United States Senator from Georgia, succeeded to the Presidency, though there is no record of his election to that office. Mr. Berrien was spokesman in 1845 when he wrote to the Treasury of the United States concerning the funds of the Georgia Society held by the Treasury. At this time, he wrote that he had made inquiry among members and found no inclination to revive the Society.

No further activity appears to have transpired in the Georgia Society until March 4, 1899, when a meeting of descendants of several original members assembled at the home of William Neyle Habersham in Savannah and organized a provisional organization. Seven members were elected to membership, their credentials having been carefully examined. Negotiations with the General Society were immediately begun for formal recognition. Mr. Foster, Assistant Secretary and Mr. T. Savage Clay, Assistant Treasurer, were appointed to carry out the negotiations. Mr. Foster's research has been mentioned; Mr. Clay did the counterpart research in Government records in Washington. They successfully carried out their task and the Society was readmitted in 1902. Mr. Foster later became Secretary General and served for many years in that capacity. During this time, he had many of the Society's records printed and expanded upon the information concerning the early Society in Georgia.

General Lachlan McIntosh served as President of the Georgia Society from its beginning in 1783 until 1789. Thereafter other distinguished Georgians followed him in that position. One of

these, Colonel Joseph Habersham who was elected President in 1794, was later Postmaster General in President Washington's second administration and continued in this position through the term of President Adams and for several months under President Jefferson. Jefferson invited him to be Secretary of Treasury but Colonel Habersham declined and returned to his home in Savannah. Major John Berrien was elected President in 1795; he had a distinguished career in Georgia as a jurist. General Samuel Elbert was serving as Vice President when he died in 1788; he was Governor of the State of Georgia at that time. Though a Georgian only by adoption, General Anthony Wayne served as President from 1789 to 1791 and had the honor to welcome President Washington on his only visit to Georgia in 1791. President Washington noted in his diary: "May 9, 1791. I recommenced my journey for Savanna; attended by a corps of of the Cincinnati and most of the principal gentlemen of the city." And "May 13, 1791. Savanna. Dined with Members of the Cincinnati at a public dinner given at the same place (at the Coffee Room)."⁶

Membership in the Georgia Society grew slowly after revival in 1902; there were sixty-five original members but in 1905 there were only twenty-seven. It was not until the 1960's that the number of members reached the number of original members. (A person may now be admitted to membership in the right of an officer of the Revolution who was eligible for membership but did not then chose to join.)

The original members of the Georgia Society were:

Major James Armstrong	Major John Berrien ⁹
Major Jacob Brice	Major Ichabod Burnett
Major John Burroughs	Brig. Gen. Abraham Baldwin ¹⁰
Major William Brown	Major Richard Call
Major Alexander Daniel Cuthbert	Captain Edward Cowan
1st Lt. Cornelius Collins	Major Emanuel Pierre de la Plaigne
Captain John du Coins	2nd Lt. Paul d'Angely,
Brig. Gen. Samuel Elbert ⁷	Baron de Malves
Major Benjamin Fishburn	Major John Skey Eustace
1st Lt. James Field	Major Robert Forsyth

Captain Charles Fuhrer	Surgeon Peter Fayssoux
Lt. Col. Joseph Habersham ⁸	Captain James Gunn
2nd Lt. Arthur Hayes	Major John Habersham ¹¹
	2nd Lt. Christopher Hillary
Brig. Gen. John Holmes	Surgeon John Hunter
Captain George Handley	Captain Hilwill
Surgeon James Houstoun	2nd Lt. Ebenezer Jackson
Ensign Charles Jackson	2nd Lt. William Jordan
Captain Denis L. Cottineau de Kerloguen ¹²	Major Philip Low
1st Lt. Edward Lloyd	Major John Lucas
Lt. Col. John McIntosh	Brig. Gen. (Brevet Maj. Gen.) Lachlan McIntosh ¹⁵
Major William McIntosh	Captain Lachlan McIntosh, Jr.
General George Matthews	Captain John Martin ¹⁶
Captain John Meanly	Captain John Milton
Captain James Meriweather	Captain Elisha Miller
(?) Robert Montfort	Captain Ferdinand O'Neal
1st Lt. Nathaniel Pearre	Major Nathaniel Pendleton
Major William Pierce	Captain John Pray (Navy)
Major John Carroway Smith ¹³	2nd Lt. Frederick Shick
Surgeon James B. Sharpe	Captain John Sullivan
Captain Francis Tennille	Surgeon Benjamin Tetard
Colonel Richard Wyllly	Captain Edward White ¹⁷
1st Lt. John Peter Ward	2nd Lt. John Peter Wagnon
Surgeon Goodwin Wilson, Jr.	
Honorary Members of the Original Society:	
Lt. Col. Nicholas Anciaux	James Bulloch
Chevalier du Plessis	General James Jackson
General John Sevier ¹⁴	

Diplomas, or certificates of membership, were originally issued only by the General Society and were all signed by George Washington; a number of these have survived and several can be seen in the Anderson House Museum. About 1790 several of the state societies had diplomas made of their own design. These state diplomas became prevalent after General Washington died; he continued to sign diplomas right up to his death.¹⁸

When the Georgia Society was revived in 1902, one of the first acts was to have a supply of blank diplomas printed. These diplomas were printed by A. Hoen and Company of Baltimore

and are of excellent detail, following closely the design of the original diploma designed by l'Enfant. Today these diplomas are printed on parchment paper (instead of sheep skin) using modern techniques which give all the grace and style of the original 18th-Century originals.

The Georgia Society, while small in numbers, is active in supporting the principles laid down in 1783. The Society in Georgia is a substantial supporter of the Anderson House Museum and contributes annually to scholarships and other forms of academic reward. In recent years the Society has commemorated Georgia Day by decorating the graves of original members who are buried in Colonial Cemetery, and by having the President of the Society place a wreath on the monument to General Nathanael Greene in Johnson Square, in downtown Savannah. Afterwards Representatives of the Society accompany the Governor on his annual walk up Bull Street. These and other activities carry in the traditions of the oldest patriotic society in the United States.

NOTES

¹Edgar Erskine Hume, *The Diplomas of the Society of the Cincinnati* (Reprint from *Americana*, New York), XXIX, no. 1 (January, 1935), 21.

²Hume, *Early Opposition to the Society of the Cincinnati* (Reprint from *Americana*, New York), XXX, no. 4 (October, 1936), 13-24; Hume, *The Gift of the Fund of the Society of the Cincinnati in the State of Virginia to Washington College (Now Washington and Lee University)* (Reprint from the *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Richmond), XLII (1934), 20-35, XLIII (1935).

³Hume, *Early Opposition to the Society of the Cincinnati*, 38; Charles Beatty Alexander, *Assaults on the Society of the Cincinnati and Its Vindication* (Washington, 1926), 24.

⁴James Orr Denby, *The Society of the Cincinnati and Its Museum* (Washington, 1967), 11-17.

⁵Francis Apthorp Foster, *Materials Relating to the History of the Society of the Cincinnati in the State of Georgia, from 1783 to Its Dissolution* (Savannah, 1934), 2-3.

⁶Hume, *The Gift of the Fund of the Society of the Cincinnati*, 20-35.

⁷Also governor of Georgia; buried in Colonial Cemetery, Savannah.

⁸Buried in Colonial Cemetery, Savannah. ⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Also a member of the Constitutional Convention, Philadelphia. His draft copy of the Constitution is one of ten of the second draft to exist. This copy is in the archives of the Georgia Historical Society, Hodgson Hall, Savannah.

¹¹Buried in Colonial Cemetery, Savannah ¹²*Ibid.* ¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴Also governor of Tennessee. ¹⁵Buried in Colonial Cemetery, Savannah.

¹⁶Also governor of Georgia. ¹⁷Buried in Colonial Cemetery, Savannah.

¹⁸Foster, *Materials Relating to the History of the Society of the Cincinnati*,
33.